

## **The Gospel Turns Sorrow into Joy (John 6:16-33)**

**Matthew Williams**

The Word of God speaks repeatedly to what we think in our minds. Mark 8:33, "For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Rom 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." 2 Tim 2:7, "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything." Matt 22:37, "You shall love the Lord your God...with all your mind."

Some of us are very comfortable with as much. We're thinking types by nature. We like to learn what is true so we can know what is true. But the Christian faith doesn't just engage our minds. It engages our hearts. It makes a claim on our affections and emotions. Matt 22:37, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

Notice Jesus does not give us a choice between loving God with our hearts or our minds, with honoring him in how we think or what we feel. He wants and deserves and commands us to love him with all that we are, thoughts and feelings alike! A Christian is someone who thinks what God thinks. It's also someone who feels what God feels. And when it comes to our feelings, one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian is joy.

Deut 12:12, "And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God..." 1 Chr 16:10, "Let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice! Ps 32:11, "Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" Gal 5:22, "But the fruit of the Spirit is...joy." Phil 2:17-18, "Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me." Phil 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Pet 4:13, "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings..."

Why is joy one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian? Because a Christian is someone who believes the gospel, the good news of Jesus and all he's done to accomplish salvation for mankind. And that gospel, that good news, turns our sorrow into joy, not in the sense of eliminating our sorrows in this life, but in the sense of making our reasons for joy greater than our reasons for sorrow such that joy abounds even while sorrow remains.

The context of 16 is one of human sorrow. When the conversation starts back in Jn 13, Jesus tells his disciples he is about to leave them. They're troubled. They're anxious. So he spends 3 chapters comforting them and explaining why they shouldn't feel that way. They shouldn't be troubled. In fact, they should rejoice! Jn 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." And as he wraps up the conversation at the end of Jn 16, Jesus doubles down on the same theme, circling back to where he began. Yes, I'm about to leave, but you shouldn't be troubled. You should rejoice! And he gives them a final list of reasons, reasons why the gospel turns our sorrow into joy.

### **1) THERE IS JOY IN SHARING IN THE LIFE OF JESUS**

When Jesus says in v. 16, "A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me," the disciples are completely confused. What in the world are you talking about? And what is this whole thing about "going to the Father"? They don't have the courage to ask him, but they don't need to because Jesus knows their struggle. He knows yours too, friend. His intimate knowledge of us, spiritual anxieties included, is such a comfort! We never have to wonder if he understands us or "gets" us.

And Jesus proves as much by addressing their struggle head on. "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? V. 20, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice."

What's he talking about? His imminent death and resurrection. Why would the disciple soon see him no longer? Because he's about to die a cruel death. And when he dies, what will happen? His disciples will be grieved. It will feel like the end of the line. Hope shattered. Promises abandoned. Game over. So why would the world rejoice? Why were the Jewish religious leaders and most of the people elated by his death? Because they didn't want to believe in Jesus. They didn't want to submit to his authority as the Son of God. They wanted to stay in charge of their own life, so they did away with his.

If you're a Christian, there are many things that bring joy to the world but ought to cause you grief, and things that bring joy to you, but cause the world to weep. The



world rejoices in absolute sexual autonomy. We do not. We rejoice in generously giving to the work of the Lord in our church. The world does not.

Be careful, my friends, to not take your emotional cues in life from the world around you. We are elect exiles, a peculiar people, who don't just think differently. We feel differently. The fact that someone is rejoicing (or weeping) doesn't automatically mean you should, or that you're failing to love them if you don't. We love our friends when we weep over what brings grief to God's heart and rejoice only in what he delights.

Jesus' disciples were right to grieve his death. The crucifixion of the Son of God is the greatest atrocity ever committed in the history of the world. And can you imagine the joy they felt when three days later, he rose from the grave? He walked out of the tomb alive. Why? Because the infinite worth of his life far exceeded the debt of our sin. The justice of God demanded his resurrection and when he rose, the disciples rejoiced! V. 20, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." Jesus saw it coming the whole way and he was right!

They rejoiced because his resurrection proved Jesus is who he says he is, the Son of God who came into the world to vanquish the curse of sin and death by bearing our sins and dying our death. He defeated death by dying and rose to give resurrection life to all who cling to him by faith. In God's kingdom, life comes through death. The sorrow of the cross turns into the joy of the resurrection.

It's like a woman giving birth to a child, Jesus says. Giving birth is an exercise in pain and anguish. But when her child is finally born, the joy in welcoming a new life into the world causes her suffering along the way to pale in comparison. It's not joy absent suffering. It's joy that transcends and surpasses suffering. V. 22, "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

So why does it feel like any kind of suffering or even a relatively minor inconvenience is readily able to steal our joy as the people of God? If Jesus says "no one will take your joy from you," why does it feel like the joy we're supposed to have in Jesus is constantly flying the coop? It's not because God has given our circumstances the reins of our emotions. It's because we all too quickly hand them over.

How do we do that? By allowing that unexpected bill, that cutting remark, the weakness in our spouse, or the rebellion in the hearts of our kids to take our eyes off of Jesus and the life-giving, joy-sustaining, hope-abounding riches that are ours in him. The resurrection of Christ ought to shape our emotional life in two ways. **First, it gives us enduring joy in the present.** If you are a Christian, right now, in this moment and every other moment of your life, your Savior, Jesus, is alive, not dead. In fact, he couldn't be more alive! Here's what that means.

Because Jesus is alive, God is always with you, for you, and will not stop doing good to you! Heb 7:25 is a reason to rejoice: "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Because Jesus is alive, you are no longer enslaved to sin! Rom 6:9-11 is a reason to rejoice: "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Because Jesus is alive, he will not fail to vindicate every act of evil committed against you with perfect justice. 2 Cor 5:10 is a reason to rejoice: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." And because Jesus is alive, not a single sacrifice you make for the sake of his body, the church, and the advance of the gospel in the world is ever in vain. Matt 16:18 is a reason to rejoice: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

His resurrection is not an isolated historical event Christians look back on with nostalgic fondness. It is the assurance of our salvation, the dawn of the new creation, and the unshakeable ground of our joy in the present. But there's a second way the resurrection of Christ should shape our emotional life. **It gives us an assurance of joy in the future!** Yes, Jesus' words in v. 22 - "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice" - primarily refer to the joy of his resurrection. They also capture and anticipate the joy of his return.

J.C. Ryle, "There is something, even in the hearts of the most eminent saints, that will never be fully satisfied as long as they are on earth and Christ is in heaven. So long as they dwell in a body of corruption, and see through a glass darkly - so long



as they behold creation groaning under the power of sin, and all things not put under Christ – so long their happiness and peace must need be incomplete.”

Oh, but what a day that will be, when he returns and we finally see him face to face! Phil 3:20–21 is a reason to rejoice: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” So is Rev 21:4–5, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

The resurrection of Christ guarantees an inheritance of eternal joy! So don’t give other people or situations power to steal your joy. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Look to the gospel to shape your emotions. Edward Klink says it so well. “The definitive and permanent nature of the disciples’ joy is not based upon the absence of any future grief and affliction but by the placement of all grief and suffering into the larger context of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” There is joy in sharing in the life of Jesus, both in the present and the future.

## **2) THERE IS JOY IN PRAYING IN THE NAME OF JESUS**

Look at v. 23. “In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I saw to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” On one level, when Jesus says, “You will ask nothing of me,” he’s promising that after his resurrection, the gospel will make a lot more sense to his disciples than it did in that moment! Many of their questions would soon be resolved.

But on another level, Jesus is teaching us something incredibly important here about the privilege of prayer. Prior to his resurrection, it was easy to think of bringing requests to him as something entirely distinct from bringing requests to God. His resurrection shattered all such notions. No human being in the history of the world has resurrected themselves from the grave after being dead 3 days. The resurrection proves Jesus isn’t just a man. He’s the Son of God. It validates his divine identity!

And after that happens, Jesus says, you won’t bring requests to me, thinking in your mind that you’re doing something other than or distinct from bringing your



requests to God. Rather, you'll realize that I have made a way for you to bring your requests directly to the Father. As the Son of God and Son of Man, I am the only mediator between God and man. I am infinitely pleasing to the Father and after my resurrection, you will experience the stunning privilege of praying "in my name."

Confidence in prayer doesn't come from being a good person or swearing that if God comes through for you, you'll do all sorts of things for him. The only kind of prayer that works, the only kind of prayer God hears and delights to answer, is prayer in Jesus' name, or requests made on the basis of the divine welcome, favor, and access Jesus has won for us.

And the fatherly favor Jesus has won for us (confirmed by his resurrection) is chiefly experienced in all its life-giving, joy-imparting fullness through the activity of prayer, calling upon the Father in the name of the Son. "Ask, and you will receive," Jesus says in v. 24, "that your joy may be full." There is a surpassing peace and joy we only experience to the degree we are faithful to cast our cares on the Lord through prayer. And we should not be surprised if we neglect the privilege that our joy begins to fade!

Now look at v. 26 because here Jesus debunks a common myth about prayer. "In that day (after his resurrection!) you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you..." Have you ever found yourself in a situation where two family members or friends don't really like each other, but they both like you, and you sort of become the relational go-between?

We can think of prayer like that if we're not careful. We can think God the Father doesn't really like us because we're sinners. I mean, because Jesus died for us, he puts up with us. He tolerates us. But he doesn't really love us the way he loves Jesus. So if we want to get our prayers answered, we need to give our requests to Jesus, who can then pass them on to the Father. If you want to get things done, it helps to have friends in high places, so to speak. Jesus says that's not at all who he is or prayer entails.

Friend, if by a supernatural work of grace in your heart, you love Jesus. if you treasure him as your Savior, the Son of God sent from God to make you right with God, then know this. The Father certainly loves the Son. He always has and always will. But the Father loves you too! And his love for you isn't a byproduct or

anonymous overflow of his “real” love for Jesus. His love for you is deeply personal – not because you earned his love or loved him first, but because Jesus earned it for you and loved you first.

Yes, there is a sense in which the Father loves the whole world. But his covenant love, his never stopping, never giving up, always and forever, justifying, adopting, and sanctifying love is reserved exclusively for his chosen people, those who love the Son whom he loves. So when you pray, Christian, know you’re not participating in a spiritual game of telephone. The Father himself delights to hear from you, he wants to hear from you, because he loves you with all his heart. You are not tolerated. You’re family.

When troubles threaten to overwhelm your soul and steal your joy, resolve to pray! Without fail, Christians who are joyful are Christians who pray because when we persevere in prayer, our assurance of the Father’s love for us deepens. Experiencing the joy requires exercising the privilege. There is joy in praying in the name of Jesus!

### **3) THERE IS JOY IN TRUSTING IN THE POWER OF JESUS**

When Jesus summarizes the historical facts of the gospel in v. 28, the disciples get really excited, thinking, “We get it Jesus! What you’re saying now makes a lot more sense than what you were saying earlier. And we believe you! We believe you know everything there is to know about God and speak with his authority, which is why we’re convinced God sent you.

Everything they say about the Lord is true and right. But their self-confidence is not, and Jesus isn’t fooled. He knows their faith isn’t nearly as strong as they think or say it is. Their spiritual self-assessment is woefully inadequate. V. 31, “Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.”

The disciples do exactly what Jesus warns later the same night when the Jewish leaders arrest him, and they all flee. He knew they would all leave his dwelling place for their own. But he doesn’t berate or shame them. He lovingly exposes their weakness. And then he immediately urges them to follow his example in finding peace not in who they are or the strength of their faith, but in who God is. “You...will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”

Don't be enamored by your own faithfulness. You will always fall short. Join me in taking refuge in the Father, in placing your confidence in the nearness and faithfulness of God. Human faithfulness will always fall short. But that doesn't destroy the ground of Jesus' joy and nor should it destroy yours, friend, whether you are confronted by your own unfaithfulness or betrayal at the hands of others.

Do not assume that because people have failed to stand by you that God has forsaken you. He has not. He is not. He will not! V. 33, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace." Not in yourselves. Not even in your profession of faith. Peace is found in Jesus.

Was their faith genuine? Absolutely. Jesus isn't lying when he says in v. 27, "you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." But there is a world of difference between leaning on your self-assessment of your own faith and leaning on the faithfulness of God. Your faith cannot save you. Only Jesus can save you! Remember that, when your faith feels weak, and you are tempted to despair.

And then Jesus concludes his final words to his disciples with a rousing summary of everything he has said in Ch. 13-16. Here's the bottom line, guys. I know you're troubled. You will continue to experience trouble. Trouble without and trouble within. Faithlessness around you. Faithlessness within you. Don't be surprised. It's going to happen. But when it happens and even before it happens, take heart. Find your joy in this life-transforming, joy-sustaining reality. "I have overcome the world."

The unbelief in your own heart? My power is greater. The opposition you experience from your friends or family for my name's sake? My power is greater. Everything that is not the way it should be, from the greatest evil to the smallest inconvenience, I am using it all for my glory and your good. This world and all the people and circumstances in it, your own doubts and self-confidence included, is not supreme. I am. The world isn't ultimately calling the shots in your life. I am.

And though I have yet to die and yet to rise, my triumph over every other power is so certain, so guaranteed, that it's not a future possibility. It's a present reality. "Take heart, I have overcome the world." As J.C. Ryle says, "He bids us rest in the thought that he has fought our battle and won a victory for us." So he has, my friends! If you are in Christ, if you are holding fast to him, even if your faith is not





greater than a mustard seed, you share in his victory. And though we're waiting for the day when all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father in heaven assures us that every rival power in the universe already exists in complete subjection to his authority.

That person who maligned you? Jesus has already overcome them. The temptation to sin you'll experience later tonight? Jesus has overcome it. The political leader who leads people away from righteousness? Jesus has overcome them. The Prince of Darkness who prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour? Jesus has overcome him. He is not favored to win or likely to win. He has already won!

Dan 7:14, "And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." So when hardship comes and threatens your joy, don't lose heart. I've already won the battle. And because I've overcome, you will too. Your story is my story. And you know my story, so you already know your own. There is abundant joy in trusting in the power of Jesus!

## **CONCLUSION**

Why is joy the distinguishing mark of a Christian? Because a Christian is someone who believes the gospel. And that gospel, that good news, turns our sorrow into joy, not because it eliminates our sorrows, but because it makes our reasons for joy greater than our reasons for sorrows such that our joy abounds until the day sorrow is no more. Until that day, rejoice in sharing in the life of Jesus. Rejoice in praying in the name of Jesus. And rejoice in trusting the power of Jesus.

A joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms. May we not undermine the integrity of our witness through a lack of joy in our lives, KingsWay. And where it is lacking, let's be diligent to confess the need for the Spirit's help to remember the gospel and take our despondent souls in hand with the psalmist: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps 42:11).